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The Time for "Positive" Transformation in Teacher Education

The Time for "Positive" Transformation in Teacher Education

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Abstract

Prevalence rates of serious mental health issues for students at all levels of education are currently unprecedented. Teaching has been frequently identified as one of the most stressful professions. Educational institutions need to be transformed into positive spaces that promote overall wellbeing for students and teachers. This transformation requires a clear, purposeful, and imaginative new vision –Positive Education. Positive Education provides curriculum and instruction that fosters both the skills of wellbeing and academic achievement. Positive Education puts teachers in a better position to rise to the challenges of the profession, which in turn helps students flourish and learn. Teacher education programs are a critical place to further develop and implement the vision of Positive Education. Thus, the article makes the case for *Positive Teacher Education*.

Colin Saby and Dr. Clive Hickson

Introduction

Imagine a curriculum that cultivates feelings of gratitude, optimism, interest, serenity, and joy. Imagine a classroom where students experience sustained periods of positive engagement and flow. Imagine a student who positively identifies with her school community and enjoys a strong sense of belonging because she has a number of healthy relationships with her teachers and peers. Imagine a school that develops true mastery and a sense of accomplishment amongst each student. Imagine an education that supports students to discover and commit to a greater purpose in life.

For a school to offer an experience as fulfilling as the one imagined above, the education system must deeply value student wellbeing. Recently, we have been imagining the type of education above and believe that schools can meaningfully contribute to the emotional, social, and physical wellbeing of students without sacrificing academic performance. We feel students deserve the opportunity to flourish in a variety of ways while learning at school. Schools primarily focus on students' academic performance; however, creating educational spaces that also nurture students' emotional, social, and physical wellbeing may be more important than ever. The prevalence rates of serious mental health issues for students at all levels of education – elementary, secondary, post-secondary – in North America are unprecedented (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2009; University of Alberta, 2011; Waddell, Offord, Shepard, Hua, & McEwan, 2002). Consequently, we argue that schools must be transformed into positive spaces that promote student wellbeing.

Students, however, are only one part of the equation. We believe teachers also deserve the opportunity to flourish. Teaching has been frequently identified as one of the

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most stressful professions (Griffith et al., 1999; Kyriacou, 2001; McCormick, 1997). Preservice teachers are also vulnerable to stress – as post-secondary students in general and during their student teaching assignments (Capel, 1997; Chambers & Roper, 2000; Mapfumo, Chitsiko, & Chireshe, 2012; Mundia, 2010; University of Alberta, 2011). Beginning teachers who leave the field early in their career have been described as "a matter of economic, social, and educational concern in many countries" (Long, McKenzie-Robblee, Schaefer, Steeves, Wnuk, Pinnegar, & Clandinin, 2012, p. 7). Thus, we feel institutions of education – both public schools and teacher education programs – must be transformed into positive spaces that promote overall wellbeing for both teachers and students.

Positive Education

Transforming public schools and teacher education programs into places that promote wellbeing requires a clear, purposeful, and imaginative new vision. Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins (2009) have articulated such a vision and called it "Positive Education." Within Positive Education, schools "teach both the skills of wellbeing and the skills of achievement" (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 293). The label *positive* is borrowed from the rapidly developing field of positive psychology and applied to the school context. "Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions" (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104). Accordingly, Positive Education may best be described as curriculum and instruction based on the findings, principles, and applications of positive psychology, which are specifically designed to contribute to student flourishing. However, we believe that students and teachers, and in particular preservice teachers, should have opportunities to

enhance their own flourishing through a Positive Education approach.

Flourishing consists of five different elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, accomplishment, and meaning (Seligman, 2011). *Positive emotions* (commonly referred to as happiness) denote the extent to which a person experiences emotions such as joy, pleasure, glee, contentment, happiness, or love. *Engagement* indicates experiencing a state of "intense concentration and absorption in an activity" (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 132). *Relationships* refer to people who have multiple positive, healthy, trusting, and caring relationships that add to the richness of life. *Accomplishment* refers to a person who experiences a sense of mastery, success, or achievement in a variety of endeavors. Finally, *Meaning* signifies a sense that one serves a greater purpose in life than simply self. In sum, a student or teacher who enjoys more positive emotions, high levels of engagement, many positive relationships, a sense of accomplishment, and greater meaning in life will experience a high level of wellbeing. (Given this definition, we use *wellbeing* and *flourishing* interchangeably throughout the paper.)

The new vision for Positive Education is closely aligned to the rising call – by an increasing number of regional, national, and international organizations – for greater attention and action toward student wellbeing. However, this call is not currently being championed in teacher education. We feel now is the right time to share the vision of Positive Education both to educators and to teacher education programs. If schools are to successfully foster student wellbeing, education systems will have to transform to foster the overall wellbeing of both preservice and practicing teachers. Positive Education has the potential to help teachers to attend to their own wellbeing, take care of themselves, and

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teach effectively so they can in turn attend to their students' emotional, social, and physical wellbeing. Positive Education puts teachers in a better position to rise to the challenges of the profession, which in turn helps students flourish and learn.

This paper takes a closer look at some threats to wellbeing being encountered by children and youth, university students, preservice, and practicing teachers. Subsequently, we outline aspects of Positive Education curricula and instruction and further expand on the potential of this approach. We intend to make a case for transforming teacher education into a process that focuses on both student and teacher wellbeing. Students and teachers have much to gain when schools respond to elements of wellbeing.

Challenges to Wellbeing: The Need for Positive Education

Fostering an understanding of the current milieu (Schwab, 1973) is an important place to begin a discussion about transforming education. Schwab (1973) argues any effort to change education that does not seriously consider "the milieus in which the child's learning will take place" (p. 503) will "inevitably fall short" (p. 506). Therefore, we aim to follow Schwab's advice and consider the milieu that many children and youth in Canada, post-secondary students, preservice teachers, and practicing teachers find themselves in.

Mental Health Issues Amongst Children and Youth in Canada

Unfortunately, many children and youth today face significant challenges that adversely affect their ability to learn and flourish at school. For example, serious mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, affect over 1.1 million children and youth in Canada (Waddell, Offord, Shepard, Hua, & McEwan, 2002) and the number of students

affected by such issues is predicted to increase by 50% by the year 2020 (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2009). Not surprisingly, students with poor mental health are more vulnerable to a number of negative educational outcomes, including lack of motivation, discipline issues, and lower grades (Masten & Roisman, 2005). Nearly 70% of all mental health issues begin during childhood and adolescence and over 75% of individuals in need of treatment fail to receive any type of services (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2009).

We are self-conscious about providing such a negative portrayal of childhood and adolescence because, as Aoki (2004) instructs us, this type of "generalized knowing is likely disembodied knowing that disavows the living presence of people" (p. 161). However, by providing an empirical account of the number of struggling students who are struggling, our intent is to move the discussion beyond the general notion that childhood and adolescence is a difficult time that all young people must unavoidably experience, to a clear picture of the serious wellbeing issues at hand. Alarming numbers of Canadian students experience anxiety and depression and relatively few get the support they need. However, in a recent Senate Committee report, the school system in Canada was identified as an ideal site for mental health promotion (Canada, 2006). Several scholars – in addition to those advocating for Positive Education – have argued that schools have tremendous capacity to integrate teaching practices that address social and emotional wellbeing (Adelman & Taylor, 2010; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

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Student Wellbeing in Post-Secondary

Lee (2013) notes that the academic, financial, social, and time management issues faced by post-secondary students are often associated with declines in their physical and psychological health and suggests that it is time for post-secondary institutions to promote health opportunities on their campuses. Such thinking, coupled with several institutionally-based student health reports, has resulted in much discussion of wellbeing on campuses across Canada. Several colleges and universities are taking steps to address wellbeing; here we share brief examples of recent developments in two Canadian universities.

Considering student health and wellbeing at Queen's University. Recently, a number of tragic student deaths at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada prompted the institution to conduct a comprehensive investigation on student health and wellbeing. The Queen's University Student Mental Health and Wellness Report (2012) outlines the various types of support young people may require as they transition to university life. The Report argues that a university must be both a proactive and a responsive community that attends to and promotes the health and wellbeing of every student. The Report also puts forward a vision that encourages the development and implementation of initiatives that educate students about emotional, social, and physical wellbeing issues that may affect them and their peers. Thus, Queen's University is taking steps to provide students with the knowledge and skills to help themselves and support one another. The Report further identifies that, for students to meet the goal of an academically successful and fulfilling experience, "a safe, supportive, inclusive and engaging community" is a necessity (Queen's University, 2012, p. 6). For example, when planning program curricula, the report suggests that students be provided opportunities to cultivate wellbeing.

Considering health and wellbeing amongst education students. In much the same vein, the University of Alberta recently acknowledged the importance of identifying and addressing student health and wellbeing issues (University of Alberta, 2011). In particular, students in the Faculty of Education reported encountering a number of challenges to their wellbeing. For example, 44% of students in the Faculty of Education reported problems with sleeping, 89% felt overwhelmed, and 50% reporting that academic-related issues have been traumatic or very difficult to handle within one year of the survey. Sadly, the report identifies the 2003 University of Alberta Senate Task Force on Wellness which "recommended the development of an integrated, campus-wide wellness vision with measurable goals along with initiatives to reach those goals" (University of Alberta, 2003, p. 29). However, the Report concluded that in 2011, eight years after the Task Force, "such a vision has yet to be established for our campus" (University of Alberta, 2011, p. 29).

Preservice Teachers and Stress

Despite regional, national, and international calls for comprehensive health and wellbeing promotion in both public school and post–secondary settings – few are echoing this call in teacher education programs (Black-Branch & Lamont, 1998; O'Brien, 2012). This lack of transfer is a concern because several researchers have noted that the teaching profession is subject to high levels of stress (Griffith et al., 1999; Kyriacou, 2001; McCormick, 1997). Similarly, preservice teaching experiences – such as student teaching assignments – can expose preservice teachers to situations as stressful as those experienced by practicing teachers.

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In our experience as teacher educators we have found many preservice teachers experience a high level of stress during their student teaching practicum. However, this phenomenon is not restricted to our own teacher education program, as student teaching practica have been being associated with moderate to high levels of anxiety and stress in many different parts of the world (Capel, 1997; Chambers et al., 2000; Mapfumo et al., 2012; Mundia, 2010). Feeling stressed and overburdened are themes preservice teachers identify as reasons for withdrawing from their teacher education programs (Chambers et al., 2000).

Although the causes of teachers' stress have been extensively examined, few investigations have been conducted with preservice teachers (Mapfumo et al., 2012; Mundia, 2010). As noted, post-secondary students face numerous challenges to their wellbeing by virtue of adjusting to life at university; these adjustments might be contributing factors to elevated stress levels for preservice teachers. On the other hand, Murray-Harvey, Slee, Lawson, Sillins, Banfield & Russell (2000), speculate that the small amount of research in this area might be due to the assumption that a high level of stress is a *normal* part of being a teacher and is accepted as a natural part of the transition from preservice to qualified teacher. Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis & Parker (2000) suggest that preservice teachers might be especially vulnerable to stress because they are entering into a profession and being placed with mentors who might also be highly stressed. Accordingly, the issue of stress in the teaching profession needs to be addressed during a teacher's preservice years to help retain those who are leaving the profession early. Finally, we strongly agree with Chaplain's (2008) assertion that high levels of stress and anxiety experienced by preservice teachers suggest that we should be concerned about their overall wellbeing and their ability to successfully handle future classroom tasks.

Practicing Teachers and Stress

When comparing the psychological health amongst 26 different professions Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald, Taylor, & Millet (2005), found teaching to be one of the top six most stressful occupations. In one study, more than 30% of teachers reported feeling 'very' or 'extremely' stressed due to heavy workloads (Chan & Hui, 1995). Attrition rates for teachers due to overburden and stress has reached alarming proportions in some parts of the world (Chaplain, 2008; Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007; Long et al., 2012).

Although teachers undoubtedly make positive contributions to student wellbeing, given the high prevalence of teacher stress, are teachers being supported to appropriately respond to the increasing number of students who face serious challenges to their wellbeing? For example, two main sources of teacher stress identified in the literature are teaching students who lack motivation and maintaining student discipline (Kyriacou, 2001). Considering that a lack of motivation and discipline problems are common amongst students with mental health issues (Masten et al., 2005), the issues of stress and wellbeing for both students and teachers must receive thoughtful attention and systemic action.

Montgomery & Rupp (2005) suggest that teachers' experience of negative emotions and a perceived lack of support both play important roles in teacher stress and burnout. In contrast, frequently experiencing positive emotions has been shown to reliably and significantly contribute to higher levels of mental and physical health, more fulfilling relationships, and better job performance (Lyubomirksy, King, & Deiner, 2005). Thus, cultivating positive emotions, a core feature of a Positive Education curriculum, can make an important contribution to this issue.

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The Case for Positive Education

Clearly many children and youth, university students, preservice teachers, and practicing teachers are facing significant threats to their wellbeing. Positive psychology has the potential to address these issues, so we will briefly consider benefits linked to greater positivity. With an impressive amount of data, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) demonstrated that happier people are more successful and productive. For example, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005), assert that "happy individuals are more likely than their less happy peers to have fulfilling marriages and relationships, high incomes, superior work performance, community involvement, robust health, and a long life" (p. 846). In relation to learning, Isen (1999) found positivity strongly linked to flexible, inclusive, and efficient thinking. For example, even mild positive moods can facilitate creative thinking, problem-solving, and improved memory recall (Isen, 1999). These findings suggest that Positive Education can meaningfully contribute both to student flourishing *and* academic performance, or similarly, to teacher flourishing and teaching performance.

Fredrickson (1998, 2001) offers a compelling theoretical frame for benefits of positivity – *the broaden-and-build theory*. This theory posits that experiencing positive emotions produces positive functioning which, over time, helps build psychological resources (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). In contrast to negative emotions such as fear and anger, which tend to narrow thinking and behavioural options (i.e., fight or flight), Fredrickson argues that positive emotions broaden people's attention, thinking, and ability to take action. Emotions such as joy, contentment, and gratitude can prompt people to engage in a wider array of approach behaviours such as play, exploration, and generosity (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). People who employ such approach behaviours are believed to

build skills, knowledge, and psychological resources that create significant adaptive advantages in a variety of domains over time (Lyubomirksy et al., 2005). Applying a positive psychology approach within schools can provide opportunities for students and teachers to feel better and function at higher levels.

Positive Education Programming and Curricula

Several "off-the shelf" positive psychology programs and manuals have been developed for elementary and secondary schools (Hooper, 2012; MacConville & Rae, 2012; Seligman et al. 2009). The Penn Resiliency Program (PRP) has been particularly effective at impacting serious mental health issues (Seligman et al., 2009). The PRP involves training teachers, counselors and other school-related professionals to teach and foster wellbeing skills to school-aged children and youth. The curriculum and instruction involves identifying and building on personal strengths and cultivating a sense of gratitude through regular writing activities, among others.

A meta-analysis of more than fifteen PRP studies revealed significant benefits to student wellbeing, including the prevention and reduction of depression and anxiety (Brunwasser & Gillham, 2008). Seligman et al. (2005) report: "The positive psychology programme increased students' reports of enjoyment and engagement in school. According to teacher reports, the positive psychology programme improved strengths related to learning and engagement in school (e.g., curiosity, love of learning, creativity)" (p. 301). Moreover, PRP has been shown to be effective amongst adolescents with diverse ethnic backgrounds in a variety of community contexts – urban, suburban and rural (Seligman et al., 2009). Based on surveys of the efficacy of Positive Education practices, Seligman et al.

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(2009) conclude: "In summary, the existing research indicates that PRP produces positive and reliable improvements in students' wellbeing" (p. 300).

The PRP demonstrates that the essential knowledge and skills of wellbeing can be developed amongst teachers and effectively applied in classrooms to improve student wellbeing. The program has received extensive evaluation and one key finding has emerged: teachers must receive excellent training in positive psychology if the program is to be effective (Seligman et al., 2009). This finding points to an opportunity for teacher education programs. If we are to create curricula, classrooms, and schools that foster students and teacher flourishing, preservicing teaching is a critical place to begin.

Positive Teacher Education: A New Starting Point

Positive Education offers a way forward for teacher education at a time when students and teachers need a structured approach to managing threats to their wellbeing. Action is required given the health and wellbeing issues that public school students, university students, preservice teachers, and teachers are facing. The vision for Positive Education is to teach the skills of emotional, social and physical wellbeing so students and teachers can experience more positive emotions, high levels of engagement, positive relationships, a sense of accomplishment, and greater meaning in life (Seligman, 2011).

A key issue appears to be that most preservice teachers or practicing teachers are currently not well prepared to imagine this type of education, let alone effectively provide it. The significant stressors teachers experience in their work lives likely serve as barriers to nurturing student flourishing, so providing preservice teachers skills to cultivate their own

wellbeing appears to be a key starting point. Few teachers have experienced training regarding the skills of wellbeing as a part of their preservice teacher training or professional development. Thus, the major goal for *Positive Teacher Education* is to provide curriculum and instruction regarding the skills of wellbeing.

Conclusion

The poor wellbeing experienced by so many students and teachers provides a clear imperative to act and a wonderful opportunity to take advantage of the growing body of knowledge that can help us all flourish. Positive Teacher Education has the potential to increase preservice teachers' ability to handle the day-to-day stressors of teaching and life so they can in turn enhance their students' capacities to handle stress. We believe Positive Education should be incorporated into teacher education programs curricula across North America. Ideally, Positive Education could be simultaneously and systematically incorporated amongst provincial school curricula, classroom instruction, and teacher education programs. However, perhaps a more strategic goal for the time being is the transformation of existing teacher education programs into *Positive Teacher Education* programs.

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